

Out of this World:

Sunita Williams breaks through more than atmosphere with 194 days in outer space and a 9-hour spacewalk

August 11, 2007

NASA is nothing if not newsworthy, and with all the talk of drunk astronauts, space station sabotage and steamy romances gone awry, you might forget that the agency has actually achieved some milestones.

In fact, besides landing on the moon and circling Jupiter, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has made stupendous progress in implementing civil rights legislation in the workplace. And they've accomplished those feats in a way that so many other employers - not to mention entire countries - still find about as elusive as a trip to Mars.

As *The City Edition* was going to press, the launch of the space shuttle Endeavor on August 8th hurled two more women, Tracy Caldwell and Barbara Morgan, into the "final frontier", as Star Trek's Captain Kirk used to say. Not that anyone's calculating, but the two constituted 29 percent of the team of seven astronauts.

By contrast, less than 3 percent of the jobs in America's blue-collar construction trades are held by women, despite three decades of litigation.

Caldwell and Morgan have their work cut out for them if they intend to match the feats of Navy Commander Sunita Williams, who spent nearly 200 days hovering around the earth in the international space station before returning to Earth in June, compliments of the Shuttle Atlantis.

Williams' more than half a



"Piece of Cake." Sunita Williams on one of her four space walks during her more than six months away from Earth. All photos courtesy of NASA

year in space set a world record, surpassing Shannon Lucid's 188-day stint in 1996. Williams also clocked the longest space walk in history for a woman, just under 9 hours. In all, she spent a total of 30 hours adrift in the ether as the space station orbited.

"She worked very hard; she did quite a bit of extra research on the weekends," NASA space-station manager Mike Suffredini told Robyn Shelton of the *Orlando Sentinel*. "She was just fun to watch."

No doubt of that. Williams, 41, floated weightless inside the space station with an unruly swarm of thick brown hair that spread in all directions, gleaming eyes and a smile that never quit. One can only wonder how Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton would have reacted to all this.

"I thought that only really, really smart people become astronauts," she told NASA's Brandi Dean in an article written last year.

As it turned out, the one tough assignment that nearly kept her out of contention was a requirement to cut her long hair before she could enroll in a military school.

Williams is the daughter of an Indian immigrant and physician. She grew up in Needham, Massachusetts, where her Slovenian mother earned a degree in finance at night while raising Sunita and two other children. The baby of the family, Williams followed in her brother's steps, attending the U.S. Naval Academy, where she earned her wings as a Sea Knight helicopter pilot. She is also a trained sea diver.

"'Top Gun' had recently come out and the life of a jet pilot seemed alluring," Dean explained in her interview with the astronaut. "But, again, there were only a couple of spots available to female jet pilots, and while Williams did all right in flight school, she

continued



wasn't ranked high enough to get her top choice. Which is how she ended up in helicopters."

"I went, 'Whoo, I've never flown a helicopter before in my life,'" Williams said. "But I tried that out and absolutely loved it. It's probably the second best view of the Earth."

Williams was deployed to the Middle East during the first Gulf War and later to South Florida, where she flew relief missions after Hurricane Andrew, according to the *Sentinel*. In 1993, she was selected for the Naval Test Pilot School and would eventually stay on to teach.

"She started to really think about spaceflight because she knew that a lot of test pilots did that," Dina Pandya, Williams's sister explained to Shelton of the *Sentinel*.

"I started looking at the people who were actually at NASA, and I thought there is no way I can even keep up with any of those people," Williams said to Dean. "I was struggling to get my master's, going to school at night, and I was like, 'I don't want to do this. This is too painful.' And I thought, 'No, they're not going to take a helicopter pilot.' I thought for sure there was really no way."

Joan Higginbotham works the controls of the Space Station Remote Manipulator System during the Discovery mission last December.

Copyright 2007
The City Edition of San
Francisco
www.thecityedition.com



Bob Curbeam and Christer Fuglesang work on station construction during Discovery's first space walk.



Barbara Morgan



Tracy Caldwell

She was preparing to leave on a Navy assignment to Italy when she got word in 1998 that NASA wanted to hire her.

Finally, she was in. Up until she took off last year and headed to the space station, she said most people accused her of kidding around whenever she listed her occupation as astronaut.

"I think I'm pretty happy with that reaction, because I hope to come across as someone people can just talk to," Williams said. "I get a big kick out of people when they say, 'I don't believe you.'"

Of course, no one's saying that anymore.

Rosemary Regello

Angels Gather Here

A collection of angel figurines with 18 categories from the most beautiful to the most whimsical and everything in between. Our "Angel of the Month" includes free shipping.

Come visit our website at
www.myangelsgatherhere.com
415.665.0999

